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| AUTHOR | Burt, Miriam; Peyton, Joy Kreeft |
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ABSTRACT

This brief describes how literacy in the first language (L1) can affect the acquisition of reading skills in English, examining ways that instruction should be developed. It explains that learning to read is especially difficult for adults learning to read in a second language. According to the research, all English language learners (ELLs), regardless of the type of L1 literacy in their background, need direct teaching in the English symbol system and in English sound-symbol correspondences. In 2001, 42 percent of adults enrolled in state-administered, federally-funded adult education programs were enrolled in English-as-a-Second-Language classes. These adults come from diverse backgrounds and have widely differing experiences with literacy in their first languages. These factors must be considered in all areas of instructional program planning, student placements, and instructional approaches. The brief examines six types of L1 literacy and their impact on ELLs' development of English language literacy: limited literate learners (preliterate, nonliterate, and semiliterate learners) and literate learners (non-alphabet literate, non-Roman alphabet literate, and Roman alphabet literate learners). (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education.) (Contains 18 references.) (SM)

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# *Reading and Adult English Language Learners: The Role of the First Language*

Miriam Burt and Joy Kreeft Peyton, National Center for ESL Literacy Education

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ERIC Brief

February 2003

# *Reading and Adult English Language Learners: The Role of the First Language*

Miriam Burt and Joy Kreeft Peyton, National Center for ESL Literacy Education

The ability to read is a critical skill for adults in the United States. Educators Grabe and Stoller (2002) assert, "As we enter a new century, productive and educated citizens will require even stronger literacy abilities (including both reading and writing) in increasingly larger numbers of societal settings" (p. 1). However, most research on reading development has focused on English-speaking children in preschool through Grade 12. (See, for example, the results of the National Reading Panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998.) Little research on reading involves adults learning English as a second (or additional) language.

In a review of the research published from 1980–2000 on reading development among adult English language learners in the United States (aged 16 years and older), Adams and Burt (2002) found only 47 studies that addressed this category of learners. Of those, only 24 were carried out in non-postsecondary education settings (adult education programs, community-based programs, and workplace literacy programs). The others were carried out in college-based intensive English programs (IEP). Although the relevant body of research is small and preliminary, it does give us valuable information about second language (L2) learners in adult education programs and points to areas in which further research is needed. (See Adams & Burt, 2002, and Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003, for a description of these populations and of the types of studies included in the review.)

## The Adult English Language Learner Population

The adult English language learner population is large. In 2001, 42% (over 1 million) of adults enrolled in state-administered, federally funded adult education programs were enrolled in English as a second language (ESL) classes. This was a 4% increase from 2000, when 38% of the participants were enrolled in ESL classes (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). English language learners are also served in adult basic education (ABE) and adult secondary education (ASE) classes, private language schools, and in programs sponsored by community-based organizations and volunteer literacy organizations such as ProLiteracy.

These adults come from diverse backgrounds and have widely differing experiences with literacy in their first languages. A number of factors influence the ways that adults' English literacy develops and the progress that different learners will make in learning to read English. They include level of literacy in the first language and in English, oral language proficiency in English, educational background, personal goals for learning English, and the structure and writing system of the first language. These factors must be taken into account in all areas of instructional program planning, learner placement in classes, and instructional approaches. This paper describes how one of these factors—literacy in the first language—can affect the acquisition of reading skills in English and the ways that instruction should be delivered.

## Literacy in the First (Native) Language

Huntley (1992) describes four types of literacy in the first language (L1) that affect English literacy development and should be considered in adult ESL literacy instruction: *preliterate, nonliterate, semiliterate,* and *non-Roman alphabet literate.* Birch (2002) adds to these types *nonalphabet literate.* Birch and others (Hilferty, 1996; Strucker, 2002) add *Roman alphabet literate.* These six types of L1 literacy and their impact on English language learners' development of English language literacy are discussed here in the sections on Limited Literate Learners and Literate Learners.

### *Limited Literate Learners*

*Preliterate* learners come from cultures where literacy is uncommon in everyday life because the language is not written, has only recently been written, or is being developed. For example, most Bantu people of Somalia are preliterate in their native Af-Maay because it has been codified for just a short time (Van Lehman & Eno, 2002). Preliterate English language learners often have had little or no exposure to written text and may not be aware of the purposes of literacy in everyday life. Traditionally, literacy instruction for preliterate learners builds on their oral language knowledge and is supported by oral language activities (Carroll, 1999). Preliterate learners generally progress slowly in literacy and other language instruction and require re-teaching of skills and concepts (Robson, 1982; Strucker, 2002). Some who never attended school as children may be unfamiliar with school culture and its attendant behaviors and expectations.

*Nonliterate* learners come from cultures where literacy is available, but they have not had access to literacy instruction, often because of their socioeconomic status. For example, some adult learners from Central America may not know how to read or write in their native Spanish because of disrupted schooling due to war and poverty. These learners have probably had some exposure to written language and may have a greater awareness of the value and uses of literacy than preliterate learners. These learners may be reluctant to disclose their limited literacy background in class, and instruction with them may proceed slowly. They may learn classroom content more slowly than other learners, because they cannot make full use of textbooks, other printed materials, and class notes for review. However, they are often highly motivated to learn.

*Semiliterate* learners usually have had access to literacy in their native culture, but because of their socioeconomic status or educational situation, they have not achieved a high level of literacy in their native language. Like nonliterate learners, they may have left school at a young age for economic or political reasons, as was the case with many Southeast Asian refugees and Central American immigrants in the 1970s and 1980s (Holt, 1995; Ranard & Pfleger, 1995).

Two studies suggest that either previous or simultaneous acquisition of L1 literacy can have a positive impact on English literacy development among these populations. Robson (1982), in a study of Hmong learners of English at a refugee camp in Thailand, found that adults with minimal literacy in Hmong acquired English reading skills more rapidly than those who had no Hmong literacy. Similarly, a study of adult Haitians learning English in New York City (Burtoff, 1985) found that those who received native language literacy instruction while learning English developed stronger literacy skills in the L2 than did the English-only group, even though the total number of instructional hours for the two groups was equal. Although strong conclusions cannot be drawn from these studies due to the small number of students involved and the nonexperimental nature of the study design, this research points to the need to examine the value of native language literacy instruction prior to or at the same time as L2 literacy instruction.

Researchers are now identifying students who have been educated primarily in the United States but have characteristics similar to those described above. Referred to as "Generation 1.5" learners, they have immigrated to the United States where they have attended schools and developed oral fluency in English. However, they are not literate in their native language, and they struggle with reading and writing in English. They may remain in ESL classes throughout their elementary and secondary school education and enter ESL programs as adults or need special attention in college programs (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999).

Many preliterate, nonliterate, and semiliterate learners, including Generation 1.5 learners, may approach English literacy learning with trepidation. They need to be given opportunities to increase their self-confidence in educational situations and to develop positive images of themselves as readers (Goldberg, 1997). Many have high oral skills in English and may have had positive experiences with learning through oral ESL instruction.

### *Literate Learners*

Learners who are literate in some writing system have the advantage of experience with deciphering and assigning meaning to print and using print to enhance their learning. Learners who are *nonalphabet literate* read a language that is written logographically, such as Chinese and Japanese. These learners may try to read in English by memorizing whole words. A study of 16 Russian and 11 Japanese learners in an intensive English program (IEP) at a Canadian university and 16 Russian learners of English in a university in Israel (Wade-Woolley, 1999) found that the Japanese learners, who use both a syllabary (kana) and a logographic (kanji) writing system relied more on English word recognition than did the Russian learners, who use a phonologically based alphabet. Wade-Woolley concluded that because the Japanese readers were not used to focusing on phoneme-to-sound mapping in reading, they were more likely than the Russian learners to depend on sight recognition of letter sequences. Learners who depend on whole word recognition to the exclusion of phonological decoding will not become proficient readers in alphabetic languages. Like children (as described in the National Reading Panel report, 2000), in order to become good readers in English, adult readers must develop an "alphabetical strategy" (Birch, 2002, p. 33); they must be able to process an alphabetic script in the way it was designed to be used (Adams, 1990).

*Non-Roman alphabet literate* learners read in a language that uses a non-Roman alphabet, such as Cyrillic or Thai, but that is still phonetically based. These learners have the advantage of being accustomed to reading with an alphabet, but they may struggle to find words in the dictionary and may need time to process written materials presented in class because the orthography of their L1 is different from that of English. For example, Nepali students, whose Sanskrit-derived letters descend below the lines of text, may, at first, attempt to direct their visual attention below the lines of English text where only the "tails" of some English letters (*g, j, p,* and *y*) are written (Strucker, 2002). In addition to directionality issues (their alphabet reads right to left; the

| Types of L1 Literacy and Effects on L2 Literacy Learning | | |
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| **L1 Literacy** | **Explanation** | **Special Considerations** |
| ***Preliterate*** | L1 has no written form (e.g., many American indigenous, African, Australian, and Pacific languages). | Learners need exposure to the purposes and uses of literacy. |
| ***Nonliterate*** | Learners have no access to literacy instruction. | Learners may feel stigmatized. |
| ***Semiliterate*** | Learners have limited access to literacy instruction. | Learners may have had past negative experiences with literacy learning. |
| ***Nonalphabet literate*** | Learners are fully literate in a language written in a nonalphabetic script (e.g., Chinese). | Learners need instruction in reading an alphabetic script and in the sound-syllable correspondences of English. |
| ***Non-Roman alphabet literate*** | Learners are literate in a language written in a non-Roman alphabet (e.g., Arabic, Greek, Korean, Russian, and Thai). | Learners need instruction in the Roman alphabet in order to transfer their L1 literacy skills to English. Some, such as readers of Arabic, will need to learn to read from left to right. |
| ***Roman alphabet literate*** | Learners are fully literate in a language written in a Roman alphabet script (e.g., French, German, and Spanish). They read from left to right and recognize letter shapes and fonts. | Learners need instruction in the specific letter-to-sound and sound-syllable correspondences of English. |

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Roman alphabet, left to right), Arabic students learning to read in English are likely to have problems with vowels, which are usually not written out in everyday Arabic writings (Ryan & Meara, 1991). Strategies that these learners may have developed to read Arabic (e.g., proficient Arabic and Hebrew readers rely on context to determine which vowel sounds to assign to words) may not work as well in English reading and spelling, where vowels must be attended to (Birch, 2002).

Both of these groups of learners have valuable reading skills in the first language that they may be able to transfer to second language reading, but they need direct, systematic, sequential instruction in the sound-to-symbol correspondences of written English, rather than merely addressing sound-symbol issues as they arise (Strucker, 2002).

Many adult ESL students are *literate* in a *Roman alphabetic* language (e.g., Spanish or Serbo Croatian). Like those literate in a non-Roman script or in a logographic script, these learners have already developed reading skills and formed reading behaviors in their L1. They know that written language can represent speech. Their educational background and literacy skills may be an important part of their self-image. They can study English texts, take notes in class to learn new vocabulary or structures, and read outside of class. The English alphabet will be more familiar to them than to others whose native language does not use the Roman alphabet; many of them may appear to have little difficulty reading English, especially those from languages such as Spanish that have many cognates with English.

Yet Roman-alphabet-literate learners still need to learn English sound-symbol correspondences before they are able to read well (Hilferty, 1996; Strucker, 2002). They need to know that English does not have the same level of correspondence between sound and written form that other orthographies or spelling systems do—that there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between letter and sound. For example, some letters are pronounced more than one way depending on the letters/sounds that follow (e.g., *c* in *citation* and *car*), and some sounds are represented by more than one letter (e.g., the hard /k/ sound can be written as *c*, *k*, or *ck*, often depending on the letters/sounds that precede and follow it). Sometimes letters in English are silent as are the *g* and *h* in *right*. At the syllabic level, readers should learn, for example, that the combination *ough* can

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be pronounced as in *tough* and *rough* or as in *bought* and *sought*. Readers also need to learn the many pronunciations of vowels, including their sounds in stressed and unstressed syllables.

## Conclusion

Learning to read is not easy, and it is especially difficult for adults learning to read in an L2. Research suggests that all English language learners, regardless of the type of L1 literacy in their background, need direct teaching in the English symbol system and in English sound-symbol correspondences. Previously learned reading strategies, learners' experiences and access to literacy, and the nature of their L1 written language contribute to the speed and ease with which learners will acquire L2 literacy. These factors, as well as English proficiency levels, should be considered in instruction of adults learning to read English.

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